

Cross-cultural disgust: some problems in the analysis of contemporary horror cinema

Part two: re-writing disgust

by Chuck Kleinhans

Recent changes in the horror genre itself and the escalation of effects in a broader category of “extreme” cinema have pushed critics to considering disgust in relation to media aesthetics. This concern with disgust merges with a new and more sophisticated interest in spectator emotions as part of the screen experience, and a new interest in disgust as a cultural, social, and political concept. As part of a longer discussion, this essay continues that analysis.

In my [previous essay on disgust and horror](#) (JC 51), I pointed out cross-cultural differences in horror film representations by noting how [my earlier essay on *Dumplings*](#) (JC 49) a film which centered on cannibalism and aborted fetuses, had raised key issues for me. I then proceeded to examine the matter in more depth by looking at three different films. I argued that because of anti-abortion organizing and political controversy in the United States, where the population remains evenly split over the issue, the possible range of what can be shown in depicting abortion is very narrow. Thus one of the very few films depicting abortion procedures, *If these Walls Could Talk*, can only show a “tragic” outcome and does not use a fetus image at all. In contrast, the Hong Kong youth-theme film, *Spacked Out*, is remarkably graphic in showing the procedures and result (heightened by a surreal style). The film’s attitude to the procedure is casual, frank, and without regret. The narrative premise in the U.S. film accepts the anti-abortion given that abortion is disgusting. The Hong Kong film mostly assumes it is “just another medical procedure” without inescapable political/moral resonance. A third film, *The Untold Story* (aka *Human Pork Buns*), also from Hong Kong, presents a different kind of revulsion. First, the film shows the eating of human flesh, which is largely treated as a joke; second, the villain rapes and murders with extreme violence and then the police torture the bad guy to force a confession. In the film’s narrative shifts, disgust with cannibal practices mutates into a depiction of violence that delivers the message that violence itself escalates violence and that such violence is emotionally horrifying and morally repulsive.

In this installment of analyzing media disgust, I consider two films that deliberately deal with “disgusting” matters explicitly, but in different ways with different effects. They are clearly minor or unfulfilled works by their respective auteurs, but are even more interesting and revealing for the subject at hand because of their problems and awkwardness. One presents a humanistic view of contemporary youth in a disintegrating global neoliberal world. The other offers a black comedy satire about the family, and the greater society, in contemporary Japan.

Fruit Chan’s *Public Toilet* (Hwajangshil eodieyo, 2002) provides an ensemble of quickly shot-on-digital-video sketches that take place in and around places where people relieve themselves of bodily waste in Beijing, Hong Kong, Pusan Korea, Benaras India, and New York City (a few other places appear as minor elements). Since the topic, public toilet, deals with recurrent elements of shit and piss that are commonly sanctioned as disgusting, the film actually can be read as providing an against-the-grain meditation on this social ideology and moving towards more complex ways of actually imagining elimination. But the very subject matter evokes a strong reaction from some people, and several festival reports

indicate some audience members were disgusted or distressed by the film, a response also evidenced in various film blog entries.

Takashi Miike's *Visitor Q* (Bijita Q 2001), also shot quickly and on a low budget in a digital format, portrays a massively dysfunctional middle class Japanese family that is transformed and re-integrated as a social unit by a mysterious outsider who intervenes in their life. Bullying violence, sexual assault and abuse, murder, and necrophilia are just some of the perverse activities depicted, but the most disgusting part may be the implacable acceptance of distressing matters as normal, and finally reconciling the family unit, pointing to the social critique at the film's heart.^[1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Disgust: a note on definition

At this point we need to take a detour through the nature of disgust and some peculiarities of its cinematic appearance.^[2] Is disgust the right term? In English (and French) the etymology links the emotion to the sense of taste. But other languages don't necessarily make this connection. We can say that in general all cultures and people exhibit an "aversive response." That is, individuals develop (and the response seems to be learned first in infancy and developed in childhood) an embodied and embedded visceral reaction to certain things or sense stimuli. Newborns make an "aversion" facial expression when they taste something bitter. At its simplest level, this is biologically functional (don't eat this, it is repulsive, it will be bad for you).

But for the most part children have to learn that their bodily waste, for example, is repulsive, unpleasant, to be avoided. Parents teach disgust. And that process tends to synchronize the senses, bringing them into harmony with each other. Thus in toilet training the child has to learn to eject and reject its waste in a controlled and efficient way. It's generally assumed, and not only by Freudians, but famously by them, that the child has to learn to separate from its shit, to overcome a tendency to think of it as "theirs" and be fascinated with it and value it. Gaining control, achieving separation, and appropriate disposal are praised and rewarded by caregivers. The baby becomes a productive member of society, in more ways than one, and in a way that weaves the individual into a future of productive labor and appropriate social role.

Thus the first stages of this process involve the individual with its direct body senses—touch, taste, smell—which are orchestrated with its more intellectual senses—sight and hearing. Screen media involve the latter two senses and can only indirectly invoke the other three.^[3] Therefore to actuate disgust, media must use representation. But the image is always a second order of experience and depends on a pre-existing cultural contract: this thing or action represented is, by common agreement, by ideology, disgusting. Take as an example, a famous moment in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). The sailors see the meat that will be served them infested with maggots.



The ship's captain sees some crew members gather around the sides of meat, angry about it. Accompanied by the ship's MD, the approach and the sailors say that the meat has worms in it. The doctor inspects the

situation, providing a medium closeup that shows the maggots moving about. He dismisses the concerns.



The sailors protest, and we get a second closeup, providing even more irrefutable evidence of the disgusting meat. The MD then tells the sailors that there are no “worms” in the meat, that those are fly larvae, which can just be washed off. The doctor thus uses his superior technical vocabulary (maggots are larvae, not worms, although they look like worms) to dismiss the sailors’ direct observation and concerns for their own health. The doctor’s casuistic trickery clearly stands as morally reprehensible, and thus it further justifies the crew’s eventual rebellion.

The audience universally agrees that maggoty meat is bad. Thus the audience clearly understands that this behavior by the ship’s officers is offensive, abhorrent, and therefore Eisenstein’s point. The officers (representing the government and the dominant class) oppress the rank and file sailors, subjecting them to health-threatening food and unjust actions by any measure. The sailor’s revolt is justified. We move from image representation to moral judgment and political conviction.

How, in human social life, we move from infant bodily experience of bitter taste to moral and political disgust is a key element of what I am investigating in this series of articles. And how in experiencing media we can move from the sight and sound of some representation to the embodied emotion of disgust is an ongoing concern.

Disgust: the economy of escalating effects

While most classic horror films largely played with the emotion of spectator fear (of the monster, of the unknown or unexplained, etc.) often heightened by surprise-producing shock, they also often balanced menace with some kind of disgust. Thus the title character in *The Mummy* (d. Karl Freund, 1932) is a reanimated dead body, Frankenstein’s monster is assembled from corpses (d. James Whale, 1931); the zombie at the crossroads in *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943) evokes a body without a soul. In their original film appearance these entities carry a sense of being revolting on some level. But it is also the case that as they are absorbed into the popular imagination, they become more familiar and less disgusting: perhaps still fearful and dangerous, but not as revolting. The passage to the popular finds melodramatic romance (*Bride of Frankenstein*, d. James Whale, 1935) in which the Bride is exotic and erotic, albeit a graveyard bricolage. Today’s beautiful Goth vampires continue the alluring romance. The path also trails over farcical comedy (*Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, d. Charles Barton, 1948), which turns repulsion at the monsters—Dracula, Frankenstein’s Monster and the Wolfman—into bumbling hilarity.

The relentless recycling of popular genre materials in entertainment culture produces the twin effect of re-introduction and escalation followed by satire and comedy, which leads to a new level of heightened effects. Thus the creepy but strangely placid zombie of Tourneur’s gothic film becomes a general assault by considerably more damaged creatures in *Night of the Living Dead* (d. George Romero, 1968). This trend evolves in Romero’s subsequent films (with more expensive prosthetics and ramped up body horror) until we get to Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* (d.

John Landis, 1983) with a zombie chorus dancing their (missing) hearts out. The escalation continues in the horror franchises of the 1980s and 90s and arrives with new rigor (*mortis*) with Asian Extreme films and the Torture Porn cycle.

The very familiarity with tropes of revulsion in an expanded entertainment media culture means that franchise characters such as Freddie Krueger appear on posters, T-shirts, the pages of the entertainment press. This repetition makes their actors into stars and fan material and changes subsequent reception. Familiarity breeds less anxiety and this pushes the makers to amplify the next round with more effects, stronger and louder assaults on the spectator. This evolution of an iconic monster along an historical axis should be sufficient evidence to show that the objects of disgust are cultural in origin and evoke different responses over time. The initial 1930s audience for *Frankenstein* did find the graveyard origins of the creature disgusting; even when it is re-animated and given some sympathy, the original revulsion remained attached. However, by the time of and in the aftermath of *Young Frankenstein* (d. Mel Brooks, 1974), Peter Boyle's "dapper man-about-town" creature evacuates any possible disgust.

The weakening of original affect through subsequent realizations pushes the effects engine to compensate and escalate. Circularity and multiplication in representation promotes not only (what some would call postmodern) pastiche but also ramps up bluntness. Jaded reception must be shocked with a higher voltage of revulsion: thus the logic of Torture Porn in the cinematic marketplace and the cranking up of gross-out humor for the intended (mostly teen) audience.

While themselves not generic horror films, *Public Toilet* and *Visitor Q* provide a path to a different understanding of disgust as a cinematic strategy and cultural ideology. These two films rewrite conventional disgust; in my discussion below, I want to explore and explain this reframing. I don't intend the discussion to be exhaustive close textual analysis, but rather present the films as illustrative of the aesthetic rhetorical strategies employed. However, to make that point I will have to supply some additional narrative detail along the way.

Public Toilet: social life in the globalized present

Fruit Chan's *Public Toilet* explores a necessary site and its human waste activities. The result rewrites our understanding of disgust. While it is commonplace to associate public toilets with excrements, Chan's narrative moves in a different direction. Shot on digital video, exploiting the mobility and flexibility of this low-cost technology, and following different characters whose lives cross and intersect in unusual ways, the film explores larger abstract questions of death and terminal illness but always with a reference to the mundane everyday world of bodily functions.

In studying Fruit Chan's films, Wimil Dissanyake found the director repeatedly explores the working class situation of his characters and their Hong Kong society.^[4] In *Public Toilet*, as in *Made in Hong Kong* (1997), and *The Longest Summer* (1999), the director presents young people at a liminal moment in their lives, transiting to full adulthood. They are adrift. As in *Durian Durian* (2000) and *Hollywood Hong Kong* (2002) characters take long journeys, seeking and exploring, and facing a world, a global future, which is uncertain. But within *Public Toilet*'s odysseys, social bonding, however temporary, takes place and promises the potential for human connection.

On a train in India on the way to Benaras, the holy city at the end of the River Ganga, an ailing elderly man who needs help getting to and using the train's toilet asks a young traveler from China to help him. In Beijing, a man confined to a hospital bed has his 12 year-old roommate (who is dying of stomach cancer) help with a mechanical bedpan. Also in Beijing, two old guys spent their lifetime fruitlessly hoping to marry a woman while gently quarreling with each other. After one dies (in a communal toilet, slipping away unattended), the survivor visits the woman (now unconscious) in the hospital and begs to marry her so he won't be alone. In Pusan, Korea, a young commercial fisherman finds an "ocean girl" has climbed up the waste pipe of his seaside portable outhouse. She discusses how increasing pollution has killed off her family as well as sea life.^[5] A young woman, girlfriend of a Chinese hitman who is about to do his last job in NYC, takes her wheelchair-bound elderly mother on an arduous

trip to a shaman at the Great Wall, hoping for a cure. The young people go off on journeys trying to find remedies (such as ginseng in Korea) or miracles (bathing in the Ganges) that can help their ailing friends and relatives but to no avail.

Their lives crisscross through modern technology with the hitman talking on the phone to his girlfriend at the Great Wall, and a Beijing guy in New York talking to his buddy visiting Benaras. The assassin enlists the Beijing traveler to video his last hit, which goes wrong, leaving two media records of the killer being killed. We see the woman taking her mother to the Great Wall, which then turns out to be a video watched by the two elderly suitors, one of whom remarks that when they were young they had to walk for miles to see a movie and now they can see one anytime. The Chinese visitor in Benaras consults an elderly holy man in a temple who recommends walking as the best path to enlightenment. Opening a door to leave, the two hear music and the young fellow asks what it is. The monk explains, “A movie, a musical. Even though people suffer, you can still find religious happiness.” And the traveler walks outside into an outdoor screening of a chorus dance number from a Bollywood musical, a horribly deteriorated print watched enthusiastically by the crowd. This swarm of connections and intersections, moving from the real to the mediated and on to the media within the real, moving across the planet, opens a sense of an uncertain but possible future.

But against or in between this grand narrative, the real work of the film operates to have us refigure what is usually considered disgusting: the human body in its animal nature. A pre-title sequence introduces bodily necessity.



A young mother hurriedly ushers a little boy into a women's public toilet, but there is a waiting line. She hustles him out as a father brings a little girl into the men's room to the same situation: no stalls available. The mother is shown holding her son and cooing to him. Cut to his POV and a stream of piss rising between his legs.

The father coos to his daughter, and we see her face as she is also peeing in public (below the frame). Thus does practical necessity overrule social normativity. The sequence quickly sets up the film's stance to making this several-times-a-day activity part of the ebb and flow of life, not something marked off, stigmatized, repulsive.[6]

We meet the film's narrator, Dong Dong (Tsuyoshi Abe), outside of the public toilet where he was born. It was built 40 years earlier (c. 1960) and at the time must have marked the modernity of community sanitation. Because of his birth, Dong Dong is called “God of Toilets” by those in the neighborhood.



A flashback shows a middle-aged woman entering the communal latrine and hearing a baby's cries.

She reaches down and rescues the newborn.

Unable to find the birth mother, the single woman raises the child



Shifting back to the present, the crowded men's side of the

Dong Dong visits Grandma, the woman who raised him,

Dong Dong's best friend, Tony, has a little brother, Sheng,

toilet functions as a meeting place. Dong Dong's cosmopolitan school buddies visit the location and find it archaic and disgusting.

who is seriously ill in the hospital. Dong Dong reports that midnight thieves have been pumping urine out of the toilets. One of Grandma's long-standing suitors, Li (Guang-pei Du), relates folk stories that urine can be distilled to produce a small amount of gold, and that virgin's urine has curative powers now being investigated by medical scientists.

who is in the hospital with stomach cancer. He watches movies on a portable DVD player with other patients; in this case a Pakistani drama with music from the 1960s.[7]



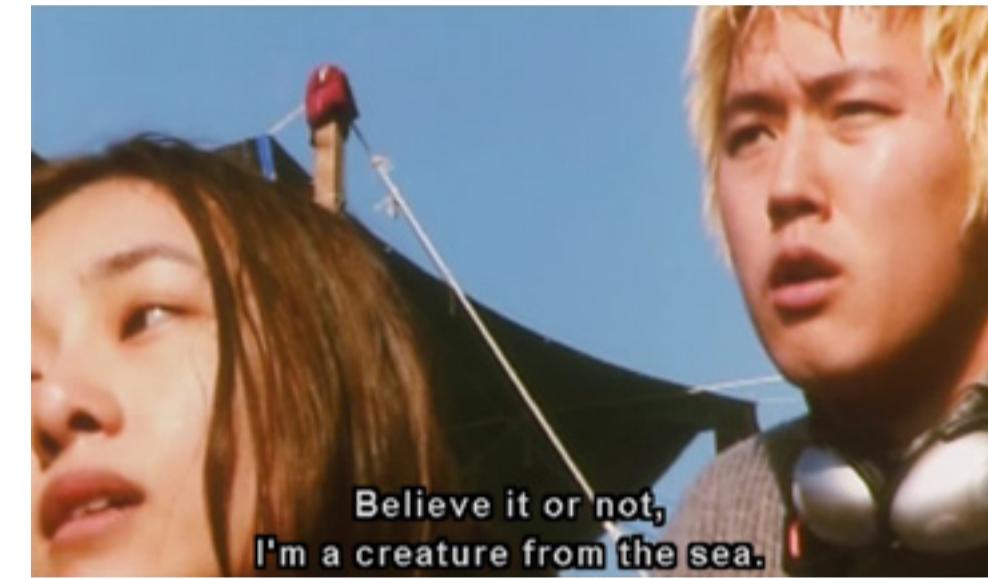
Dong Dong and his Somali friend, son of the ambassador to China (Shirwa Mohammed), try to get their buddy Stone (son of an Italian journalist couple stationed in Beijing where he was born and raised) to consume a pint of urine to see its effects.



Stone (Pietro Dilletti) warily tries the liquid, chokes and vomits, producing hilarity among his buddies.



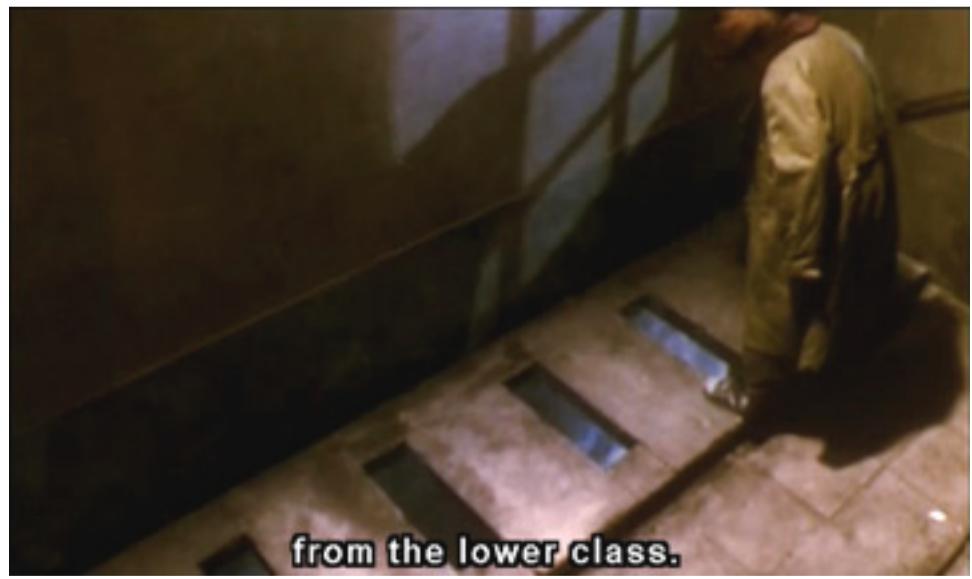
Kim finds a young woman, Ocean Girl (Yang-hie Kim) who climbed up the waste tube and emerged topside seeking food.



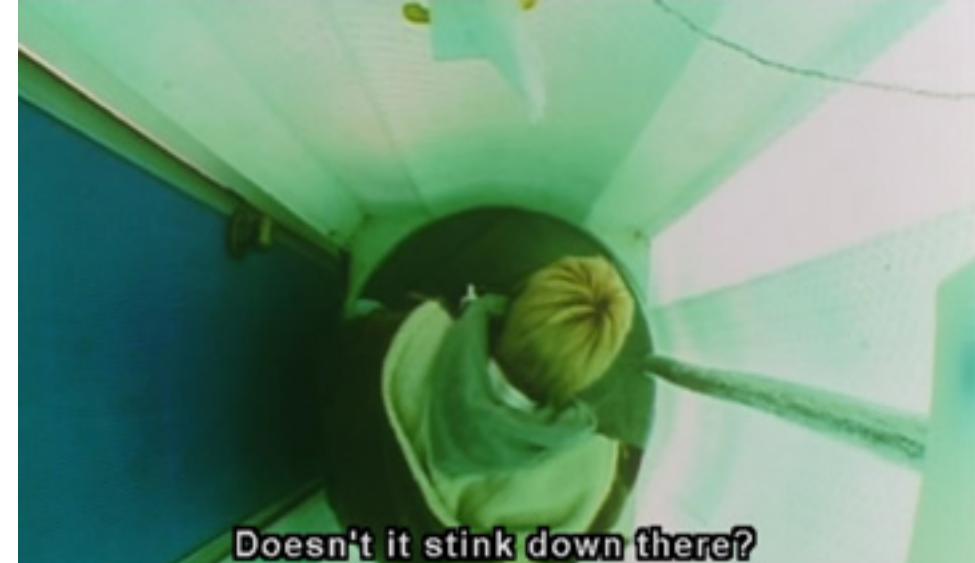
An elaborate transition sequence moves from the Beijing communal toilet down through sewage to the sea, moving underwater and eventually arriving in Pusan, Korea, at seaside where a young commercial fisherman, Kim (teen heartthrob Hyuk Jang), works with his family. They use a portable outhouse with a discharge pipe to the sea.



Dong Dong goes to visit Grandma in the hospital, but the nurse tells him she wandered away. The night before she asked the nurse to accompany her to the toilet. "She said it was very lonely to shit by herself." It turns out she packed up and left the hospital and we see her in a park with her two old suitors, at a large gathering of retired people who sing old songs, in this case a choral version of Mao's "The Long March." L to R: Zhang (Wen-hui Li), Grandma (Zhi-hong Wang), Li (Guang-pei Du). Grandma collapses at the end of the song, before the ensemble was going to sing Happy Birthday for her 68th year. Born in the early 1930s, her generation experienced war with Japan as a child, civil war as a teen, and the creation of the People's Republic at about age 15. She's taken back to the hospital where she rests in a coma.



Dong Dong, distressed at the loss of the woman who raised him, visits the public toilet near their residence and reflects on the past. "Grandma told me that most of the Gods of Toilets in history were women and came from the lower class. Childbirth was seen as a filthy activity, so babies were born in toilets. When the Heavenly Father learned of this, he named them Gods of Toilets out of empathy."



In Pusan, Kim visits Ocean Girl in the portable toilet.

She answers him, explaining that ocean pollution has endangered fish and her family.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



At night in Times Square, NYC, hitman Sam (Sam Lee; in shadow above) talks to his girlfriend, now at the Great Wall seeking help from a shaman for her ailing mother. She begs him to quit his violent life, and (in full cinematic cliché irony) he promises this is his last job. Someone carrying a porcelain toilet walks past during the call.



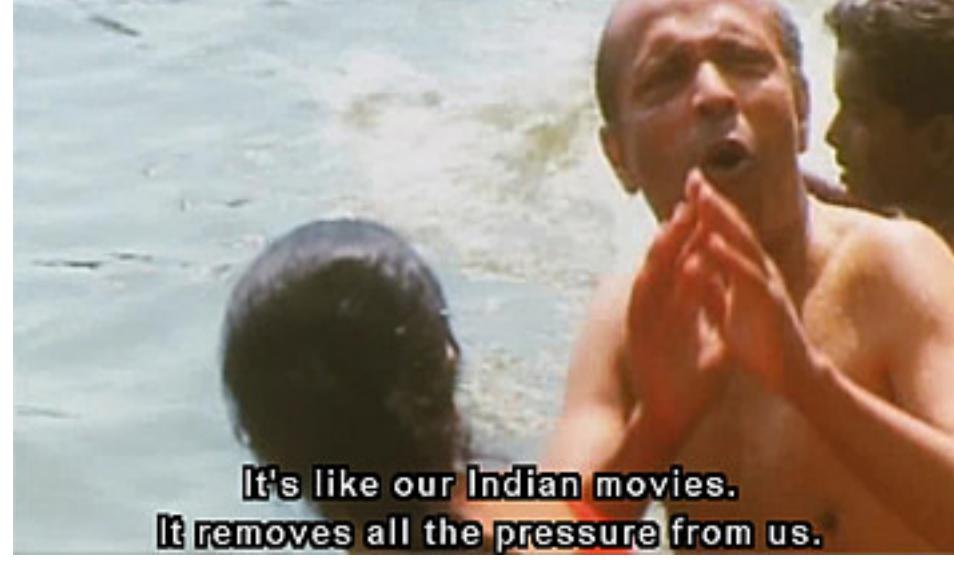
Back in the Beijing hospital, elderly patient Fatty whose bed has a novel motorized bedpan gets Tony's little brother, Sheng, to assist with the device, which moves into place under the bed and wraps the waste in a plastic bag for disposal. A modern mechanical marvel modulates the disgusting production.



Fatty's good humor and flirting with the nurse underlines the purely instrumental nature of hospital behavior, its matter-of-factness, while the automated technology is another wonder of modern progress. Later Sheng is disconsolate that his water pistol has disappeared. Fatty tries to cheer him up by reminding him that the Korean film they saw was really good, especially the special effects. "They got me so excited I had to take another dump!"[8] [\[open notes in new window\]](#)



On a night train in India a frail elderly man asks Chinese traveler Tony for help. He agrees, offering the kindness of strangers, and reminding us that care-giving modifies any predisposition to find human waste disgusting.



Having arrived in Benaras, Tony is invited to bathe in the river.



Film-within-the-film. Meanwhile in NYC, the hit goes wrong. Recorded on Dong Dong's hidden camera, a homeless guy in a midtown public toilet finds the hidden gun before Sam arrives. When the deal comes down, the homeless guy and Sam are shot. Dong Dong, filming outside, sees the killers flee as wounded Sam collapses on the street. Dong Dong runs inside, retrieves the camera, and flees.



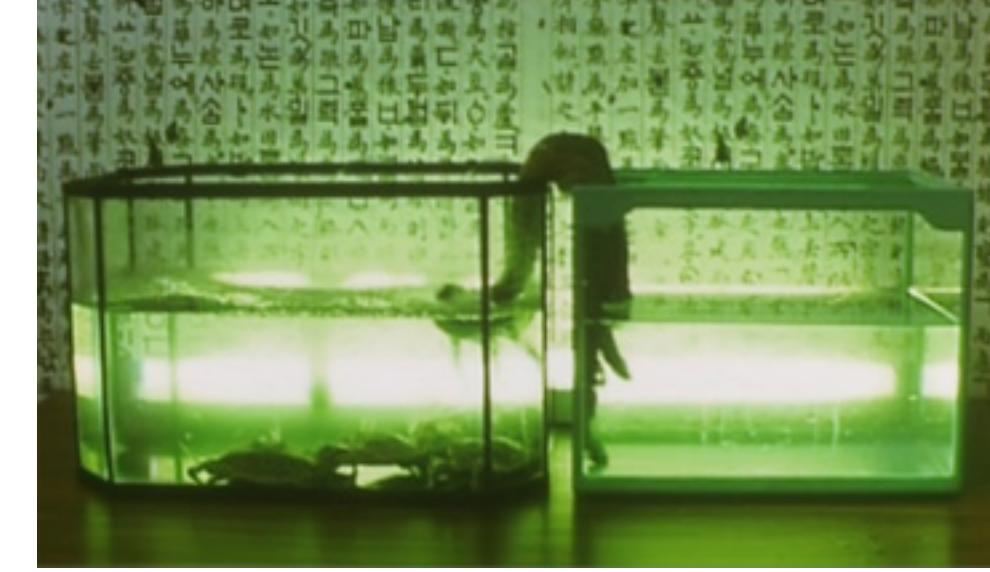
In Benaras Tony visits two guys he met on the train who first took him for Japanese and were surprised that he spoke Chinese (and he that they did as well). They explain they are Non-Resident Indians, and grew up in Hong Kong where their father, a migrant worker from India, manages a public toilet. This is their first time in India.



They say their father is called “God of Toilets” because of his occupation, and Tony tells them about Dong Dong.



Later the NRI brothers think about their future while taking a taxi in Benaras.



And they see men pissing in public, which they find bizarre, if not disgusting.

Kim’s close friend Cho (In-seong Jo, another Korean teen idol star), afflicted with an inherited illness that will kill him before 40, decides to leave Korea and look for a cure. In China he asks a fellow passenger about a curative fungus; the young woman replies that what he’s seeking is old fashioned; nowadays everyone uses White Lotus.



Back in Pusan, Kim attends to Cho’s pet octopus. (When leaving, Cho asks his buddy to “take care of my octopus”—a joke on the then wildly popular teen girl film *Take Care of My Cat* (d. Jae-eun Jeong, Goyangileul butaghae, 2001). Placed in adjoining tanks, the octopus leaves its home to attack and eat large crabs next door.



The dramatic animal action sequence is watched with great amusement by Li and Zhang on a portable DVD player. They remark how when they were young you had to walk hours to see a movie and now it’s very easy.

Sharing time and talk in the public toilet, Zhang tells Li about a famous court physician in the Qing dynasty who diagnosed the royals by inspecting their excrement daily.



Complaining he is constipated, Zhang stays behind when Li leaves, and then dies, in the same place Dong Dong was born 20 years earlier.



Back at the hospital, Fatty dies while experiencing explosive diarrhea. His young roommate, Sheng (Yi-sheng Sun) now alone, climbs on Fatty’s bed and sticks his head into the bedpan hole, calling “Fatty, where are you?” As with Kim’s portapotty dialogue with Ocean Girl, the toilet hole is a window on an alternative world, refiguring the site of disgust into attempted communion.

In Benaras, Tony consults a holy man who advises him to keep walking to find a cure for his brother and enlightenment. As he leaves the temple he hears music and outside the temple door an open air screening of a Bollywood musical is going on. The print is horribly scratched and worn, but the monk explains, “It’s a movie—a musical. Even though people suffer, you can still find religious happiness.”

Traveling by boat on the Ganga, Tony sees dogs chewing on human body parts. Since the poorer people cannot always afford enough wood to completely consume the dead person, some partially burned bodies end up floating downstream and are subject to salvage by dogs.[9]



From Benaras, Tony calls Dong Dong and while on the phone and describes his participation in the local custom.

In the penultimate scene, voice-over narrator Dong Dong reflects on the uncertain future of this contemporary world.

And in a symbolic sequence we see the diverse young travelers gathered together, unified in the film frame, while presumably actually dispersed worldwide in the film's narrative.



The group is silently looking at the Pusan portapotty which floats on an icy river. (Earlier it fell off a truck and in a comic chase slide downhill through the city, finally falling into the sea.) Is the image an objective correlative for the characters' feelings? A return to the object of the film's title, now transformed by the narrative design into a richer and refigured meaning?

But the odd symbol is superceded by a breathtaking landscape shot with a long human procession crossing the space as the final shot.

Public Toilet goes back and forth between moments which are almost outrageously grotesque (Ocean Girl surviving on waste and living in a toilet) or funny in an adolescent humor way (getting Stone to try to drink urine) and very mature observations about daily life (human interdependence when traveling; loneliness in old age). It moves through folk stories (the curative powers of a virgin's pee) and fantasy depictions (the plastic "baby" doll used to represent Dong Dong's birth) to pop culture topos (the killer on his last mission).[10] Many of the film's examples have to do with pollution, and they remind us that it is the poor and working people who experience ecological degeneration first hand. Fruit Chan's familiar themes—youth adrift, relations to someone dying, an uncertain future, and the body as carrier of history—are all present in this work.

While Tony leaves Benaras on a bus, Dong Dong muses, "Human failures have brought about the destruction of the future: diseases, pollution, war, natural disasters. Everything rages on like a mountain fire. What kind of technology can bring a stop to all of these?" Some one could nit-pick the logic: do humans create natural disasters? Earthquakes and volcanoes? Yet man-made global warming does have results in "nature" such as changing weather patterns, melting icecaps and glaciers, more violent tropical storms. And man-made pollution has destroyed vast areas of the sea for fishing. As the film draws to a close, we see first the individual trekkers, and then the group of them gathered looking at the portapotty in the river. We sense them as individuals trying to find a passage to the future. The film's elders, particularly Grandma and her boyfriends, lived through a time of transition that was grounded in the social, in a communal materiality. The youth have been stripped of that social basis, free from place and family to be part of an international migrant labor force. The public toilet stands for a private act that takes place in a public place. As Grandma said, it can be lonely to shit all by yourself.

Visitor Q: the family as black comedy

Takashi Miike's *Visitor Q* starts by presenting a massively dysfunctional family and then moves to bring them together in harmonious productivity. In the conclusion, the family has achieved the socially sanctioned ideological norm of the Good Nuclear Family in Japan. The runaway daughter has returned, the son has resolved to study hard for his entrance exams next year, and mom and dad have regained joy in their relationship, enthusiastically sharing a common project, while dad finds an exciting new professional project and mom ascends to being the celebrated provider of maternal plenitude. To get to that end point, the members are involved in multiple murders, mayhem, rape, and drug use. Thus the film implicitly asks, what kind of a society establishes a social norm for the family that can only be achieved by criminal and socially grotesque behaviors?

The film also showcases the celebrated badboy director's rapid production skills while using digital video cameras and editing. Originally part of a package of six feature films intended for direct to DVD

circulation (the films were showcased in a small Tokyo theatre for a short time before sales), *Visitor Q* depicts a series of disgusting and disturbing actions in a self-consciously satirical comedy. Many critics compared the film to *Teorema*, Pasolini's 1968 film in which a stranger enters a family and through sexual encounters reveals the social group's dark side. The film could also be compared with Buñuel's *Susana* (Mexico, 1951) in which a young woman hired as a servant unlocks the hypocrisy of an aristocratic family. It's also a riffing on a well-known Japanese satiric comedy, *The Family Game* (d. Yoshimitsu Morita, 1983, Kazoku gemu) in which a modern Japanese family hires a tutor for the goof-off younger son so he can do well in his entrance exams. But the new element begins a slow cascade of changes and trouble that ends in disruption that reveals all the problems below the initially placid surface.

Rather than revealing what is well-concealed, Miike's film begins and continues with open dysfunction on display. The stranger doesn't speak and hardly interacts with the family members, functioning more as witness than provocateur. The family's father was a broadcast TV journalist who lost his job when he tried to interview a gang of young toughs and they assaulted him, taping the assault which included pulling his pants down and sticking his microphone up his ass. The father is trying to get back into the news business by making a new documentary on troubled youth, using his own son and daughter as case studies. The narrative and style avoids naturalist realism and gives us very little to understand character psychology. But it does carry connotations of realism with video-within-the-film and a good amount of handheld footage. The father seems increasingly maniacal in his crazed pursuit of getting his job back, and he's also oblivious to the situation or feelings of his children and wife, but we don't know why. Many viewers react to the film by labeling it disgusting, as evidenced by blog entries on sites such as IMDb.com, Amazon.com, and Asian film sites. But, as is often typical with horror films, others find precisely the same events comic, over-the-top, and marked with satire. Murder, necrophilia, and incest collide with bullying, drug addiction, prostitution, and lactation in a free-for-all of outrageous acts. The film's audience is drawn in not to analyze and reflect, but to see how much further the film will go: reproducing the same reality TV journalism sensation-seeking as the dad's profession.

The first scene, 12 minutes long, sets the extreme theme. A title asks: "Have you ever done it with your dad?" We see a young girl wearing a Japanese schoolgirl outfit undressing. The space seems like a sex hotel room and it's shot with several cameras: DV and still, handheld subjective, and also static. A middle-aged man says, "I can't do this." The young woman says, "Touch me." From his camera POV, his hand goes under her short skirt and he fondles her. Jumping into the start of the film with no other set up, we are led to assume this is the well-known Japanese male sexual obsession with school girls. The woman begins to bargain for services. He is videotaping the encounter; she is taking stills of him; a third static camera records the scene. In the poorly lit scene he goes down on her genitals (digi-blur) and then begins intercourse which quickly ends: she mocks him, "early bird!" He replies, "you can't tell anyone this." She ratchets up the price of the encounter for her silence.



In extreme close up a young woman speaks to the camera, saying she understands the purpose of the documentation, to show "the truth about teens today. They show us the future of Japan...that hopeless future." Since we don't know the context on first viewing, it is only in retrospect when we know she is talking to her father, a TV reporter...

... that we can fully understand she is using the banal rhetoric of broadcast TV "exposé" journalism and actually mocking her dad. The teen uses her own still camera to document the encounter, taking a picture of her father at work while he records the same moment on HD video. Even with the clue intertitle, only in retrospect would many realize this was incest as well as prostitution and the father...

... has been "investigating" runaway teen prostitutes by "interviewing" his own daughter who is one. The provocative title (in true seedy and sensational journalism style), "Have you ever done it with your dad?" is being answered with the cameras. And the encounter ends with his anxiety about his premature ejaculation and keeping it a secret rather than keeping the fact of incest "our little secret." She agrees, if the price is right.



At her invitation, he touches her crotch.

Having negotiated the price, Dad strips down and begins to caress her.

She takes a still picture of him going down on her genitals.



Mounting her, he quickly climaxes.

She mocks his premature ejaculation. The reversal and humor is especially strong. Whereas normally prostitutes humor their clients and build up their egos (part of the job, and also seeking a bigger tip), this gal humiliates her client, which also gets her a revenge on Dad.

And a higher fee. Against the baseline expectation that a father having sex with his daughter is using his power to force her or manipulate her “against her will,” here the daughter has the upper hand, gains the coercive awareness that he has a premature ejaculation problem, and thus blackmails the client/father (as family members often can use intimate knowledge against each other) for her own ends: more money. A replay of Nabokov’s *Lolita*.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Cut to "Have you ever been hit on the head?" Seated, the father waits for a light rail train. He sniffs his finger, with his daughter's lingering scent. In his first appearance, the unnamed Visitor, a trickster figure, stands behind him with a large rock. And hits Dad on the head.



Cut to "Have you ever hit your mother?" A middle-aged woman works on a jigsaw puzzle. A teen male enters and begins hitting the woman, yelling at her that she bought the wrong toothbrush. The physical and verbal abuse continues until he retreats to his own room.



In her bedroom, she examines the bruises and scars from previous attacks ...

... and proceeds to do her own coping by shooting up heroin in her thigh.



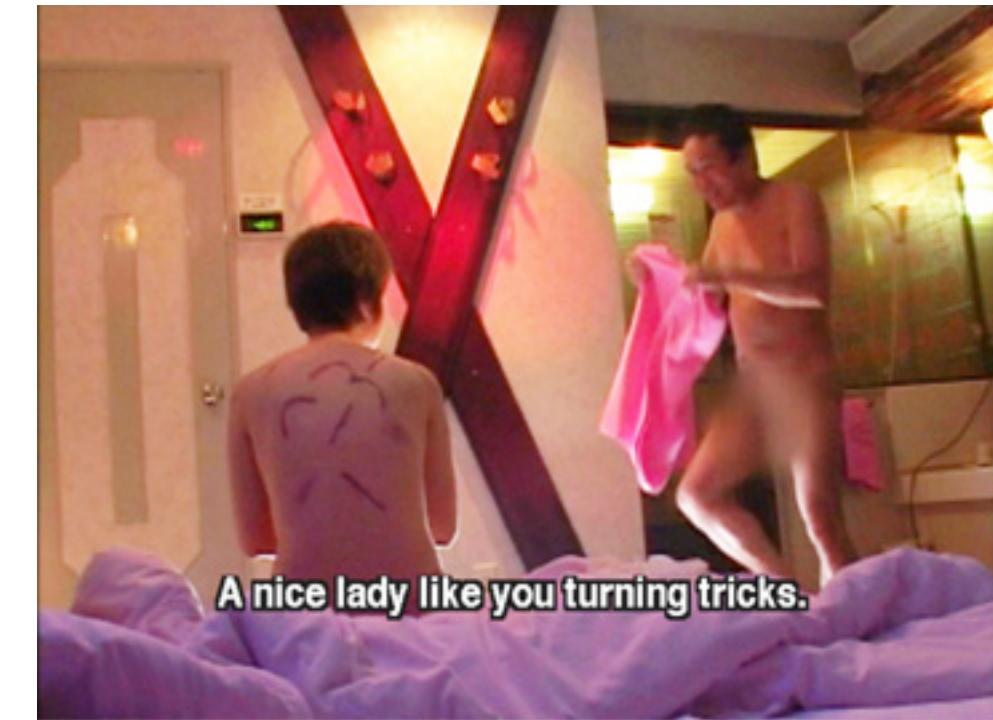
The father's professional humiliation is shown when he replays a video of his investigation of some young toughs. They rough him up, grab the camera, pull down his pants, and record sticking the microphone up his ass.

Having lost his TV job following display of the video and subsequent ridicule, Dad hopes to get back in the business with a new, more dramatic story. He comes across his son being bullied on the way to school.

Rather than intervening, he records the event, planning to parlay it into an entré for getting his job back.



Meanwhile, Mom is supporting her addiction by selling herself during the day. She goes out looking like a middle-class matron in a tailored suit and skirt and ends up in a hotel room with a middle-aged guy who appreciates her even if she does have a limp and scars.



He meets with his former producer (and former lover, it seems) trying to talk her into the story. She's not interested.



Home again after buying more heroin with her earnings, she shoots up and relaxes.



Drawn into her daughter's room, mom allows Visitor Q to embrace her from behind. He then begins massaging her breasts. She begins to lactate and expresses milk several feet away, spraying it on a photo of her daughter. The son returns home and sees the scene.

He's concerned about her bruises and asks if her pimp beats her. He then talks her into beating him with his belt. She gingerly begins, then gets into it.



At dinner, Mom has prepared a great meal and beams with a new-found satisfaction. The son explodes and hurls a bowl at her. Dad and Visitor Q are impassive and continue to eat.



With her new attitude, Mom goes in the kitchen, returns with a knife, and throws it at her son.



Outside, the bullies have returned for their nightly intimidation of the son by shooting fireworks at the house.



In an earlier episode the parents remained mute and inexpressive during an attack, this time Dad jumps at the opportunity to record the moment, excited by his intended story hook: his feelings as his family is endangered.[\[11\]](#) [\[open notes in new window\]](#)



The next day Dad talks the producer into watching his son being bullied and pitches the story again.



The producer is uninterested and tries to get away. He pursues the woman and attacks her, yelling that she complained in the past about his premature ejaculation but now he'll show her.



Ramping up his extreme behavior, as the rape continues, he inadvertently strangles her to death as Visitor Q tapes the episode. They bring the corpse home and place it in a small greenhouse.



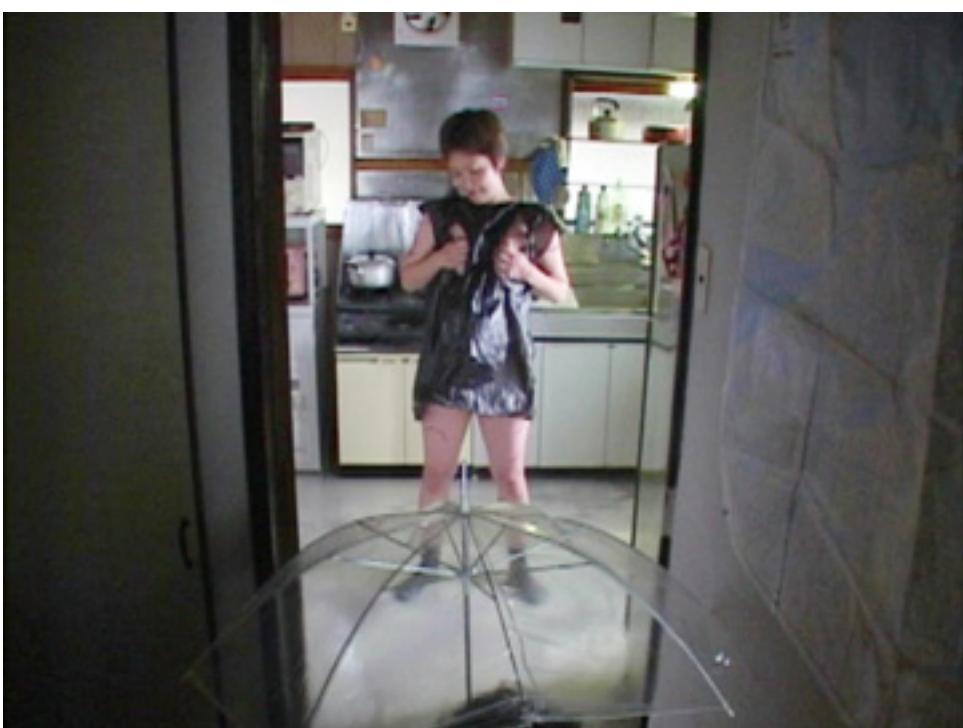
While Dad figures out how to dispose of the body, Mom shows Visitor Q her new joy in lactation and sense of fulfillment.



Meanwhile, Dad is busy marking the producer's body for cutting it up. Attracted by the body, before continuing he decides to have sex with it.



At first he's excited about how tight she is, then he feels that she's getting wet and calls it a miracle that a dead body could still lubricate. But then he discovers that the corpse has released its bowels. Shocked, he also finds that rigor mortis has set in and his penis is locked in a tight grip. He's trapped and has to call for help.



Meanwhile, back in the kitchen, Mom has produced a prodigious amount of milk and adds her own orgasmic ejaculation to the puddle on the floor. Visitor Q finds a clear umbrella and watches the show.



Alerted to her husband's distress, Mom runs (limping) to the supermarket to buy dozens of bottles of vinegar that may shrink the skin and free hubby. But no, it doesn't work and, ever resourceful, she tries a new tactic: she injects him with heroin which frees his penis from the deadly embrace.



Now united in a common purpose, they plan to dispose of the body.



The son returns from school, along with the bully boys. The parents unite and quickly kill the interlopers, joyously sharing their common purpose.

Their son, prostrate in the kitchen-floor milk puddle, decides he will study hard for his entrance exams. Soon after a street encounter with Visitor Q (in which he bops her with a rock), the prodigal daughter returns home.

She sees her mother in full nurturing mode and joins in the nuclear family reunion.

Rather than the more familiar plot of a stranger upsetting normality to reveal deep problems in the family, Miike starts with a family in total disarray. The visitor brings the family back to an ostensible norm and unity. The dark comedy reveals a still deeper pathology: the entire society is sick if this is the means to unite the family into a productive unit.

Disgust in action and in reaction

These two films share a loose structure that seems partly derived from enthusiasm for using the new digital video possibilities of small handheld cameras with an improvisatory production and acting style. Both films exploit their HD video origins for dramatic and formal effect. Both use the device of the video-within-the-film—the characters being involved with moving image making, which we in turn see as internal narrative elements. The characters “make” little “documentaries” which are woven into the larger concerns in *Public Toilet* most startlingly. The hitman sequence holds to a logic of two cameras—one held by Dong Dong outside of the toilet, and the other a passive hidden camera placidly witnessing the interior events. After Dong Dong escapes with the two cameras, in distress he throws away the evidence in waters surrounding Manhattan. But later he dives in and retrieves it and gives the record to the hitman’s surviving girlfriend.

In *Visitor Q* the most startling internal footage is the Dad and daughter encounter in the motel, but it is also hilarious as tables are turned: the same device as when the father is assaulted by the young toughs who put his microphone up his rectum. But as much as these are “staged” events—as we know because we are watching a dramatic fictional film with a name auteur director—we also have a strong sense that both directors are self-consciously using the characteristic technical qualities of the (then brand new) portable high definition cameras to inscribe a spontaneity and improvisatory nature to their film. In both films we sense that some shots and sequences are happening before us without extensive preparation (much more so in *Public Toilet*).

And in both films there are moments which we take as “pure” documentary: in *Public Toilet*, these include the octopus attacking the crabs, and the Benaras scenes of the funeral pyre, the dogs eating the limbs of some bodies, the guys pissing on a wall in public. And in *Visitor Q* the mother’s lactation is obviously documented, not faked.^[12] A further “authenticity effect” is offered in the *Visitor Q* sex scenes when a digital blur appears to block out direct viewing of genital display and activity, thus affirming that there “really” was something to obscure.

The ethical space of documentary has been eloquently examined in key essays by Vivian Sobchack and Bill Nichols.^[13] They consider what it means when we have a factual (as opposed to fictional) media representation of events such as death. Nichols extends this by remarking on fictional films that incorporate on-the-scene events (famously Haskell Wexler’s *Medium Cool*). With these films the consideration is similar if not so extreme. Actuality intrudes into the narrative. The audience assumes that when Stone drinks the pint of “piss” in *Public Toilet*, it is actually an innocuous yellow liquid such as beer and he is acting disgusted. We can laugh at his reaction. But when we see the funeral bodies in Benaras or the pissing in public, we assume it is actuality woven into the fictional narration. “This is how they do things there,” is the default reset. Disgusting? Only from a cultural divide that cannot construct a cultural relativist bridge.

The effect of disgust on the audience is connected to formal expression as well. As José B. Capino observes,

“Is the affect of disgust produced at the moment when the film lingers too long on something or captures something implicitly deemed unwatchable in media culture? In other words, disgust is ‘produced’ when an unwritten rule in representation is being flagrantly violated, so that what produces it is not just the ‘excess’ in the image but the absence of a cut or the avoidance of a reframing.”^[14]

As we saw with the opening *Potemkin* example, the first closeup establishes the fact of maggots. The second closeup by lingering on them wriggling around builds revulsion. In a now well-known example, the extremely violent rape in Gaspar Noé’s *Irreversible* (2004) with a static camera recording the event in “real time” increases the horrifying act. Another famous example is John Water’s *Pink Flamingoes* (1972) when in one shot a dog craps on the sidewalk and Divine grabs the turd and puts it in her mouth.

The two films differ in the mode of employing disgust to attain their end. Some shots in *Public Toilet* produce an initial revulsion: the camera’s underwater passage seems to pass through waste matter, and the bather-filled water in Benaras is clearly foul. Although clearly marked as fantastical, Ocean Girl’s discussion of pollution is pretty disturbing:

“OG: When we were young we ate the waste of fish because our teeth weren’t strong enough...just imagine shit comes out through the anus. It’s nothing but the waste of digested food.

Kim: Why, then, don’t you eat human feces? It’ll make more sense.

OG: Fish need more nutrients than us, so we let them eat. But because of pollution we were deprived of our food. In the end my parents made us eat fish wastes. They turned out to be more nutritious....”

The film balances this disturbing grotesqueness with moments of human tenderness, and this marks its strongest achievement. It asks us to re-evaluate what initially seems disgusting with a fuller, richer, and humanist context.

Visitor Q centers more on moral disgust with incest, bullying, a son physically abusing his mother, drug use, prostitution, and parental dissociation from the everyday at the start and the grotesque aspects of murder and necrophilia coming into play only at the end and clearly for comic satiric effect. The critique aims at the family in which keeping up external appearances and social roles are far more important than dealing with direct violence, palpable abuse and errant behavior. But the film also takes aim at Japanese media sensationalism where the constant circulation of social pathologies on TV (schoolyard bullying, children abusing their mothers, teen prostitution, the declining birthrate, etc.) is there for ratings, not to actually understand the situation or change it. (Not much different than U.S. TV with “reportage” shows such as *To Catch A Predator*.) By pushing to the limit, Miike aims for the dark side, using disgust to advance social satire.

Further consideration of screen disgust must turn to recent critical writings on disgust. That will direct my next installment of this project.

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Notes

Thanks for offering information and critical comments at key points in the writing: Julia Lesage, David Andrews, J. B. Capino, Gina Marchetti, Larry Knapp, and Jyotsna Kapur.

1. A detailed narrative summary: Tom Mes, *Agitator: The Cinema of Takshi Miike* [revised edition] (Surrey: FAB Press, 2006), 206-215. [[return to page 1 of essay](#)]
2. Here I will sketch in salient points. A later essay will provide a critical review of the expanding recent literature on disgust as a biological, aesthetic, social, and cinematic concept.
3. It can be argued that video games have a tactile dimension via the use of controllers, and interactive touch-screen devices also provide tactile sensations. I'll address some recent critical discussions o "haptic" viewing and synesthesia in the next installment.
4. "The Class Imaginary in Fruit Chan's Films,"
[http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/
FruitChan-class/index.html](http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/FruitChan-class/index.html)
5. "Ocean Girl" is clearly a fantasy creature, but she evokes a profound discussion with the young man about environmental degradation and the future, a concern he carries with him. What if ocean creatures *could* talk to us about what they are experiencing?
6. A commonplace trope in Chinese film (PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong) is depicting a little boy peeing in public space. In general it seems to be considered "cute"; to a cultural outsider, like me, it seems different from Euro-American visual culture. It is so ordinary, that when I've asked Chinese friends about it, they claim they never noticed it. Yet once you are aware of it, it seems very frequent. A well-known example (used in a more narratively complex way) in an earlier Fruit Chan film, *Little Cheung*, involves the title character, a boy, being punished by having to stand on a post in the street. When he has to urinate, he has to do it out in the open.

Male urination also appears in rather simple narrative service to show vulnerability (of a victim) or alpha-male power display (of an aggressor.) For

example, *Mad Detective* (Sun Taam) d. Johnnie To and Ka-Fai Wai (HK, 2007). For a much more complex use of urine and excrement in narration, *The King of the Children* (Hai Zi Wang, 1987) d. Chen Kaige, as analyzed by Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 108-141. And Zhang Yimou, d., *Red Sorghum* (Honggaoling, 1987), examined by David Leiwei Li, "Capturing China in Globalization: The Dialectic of Autonomy and Dependency in Zhang Yimou's Cinema," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 29:3 (fall, 2007) 293-317.

7. The clip seems to be from the Pakistani Urdu film *Insaniyat/Humanity* (1967), (d. Shabab Kiranwi). The singer is credited to Noor Jehan, (1926-2000) who was a child star in the 30s and after partition moved to Pakistan and made films there into the early 60s, and then was a playback singer. In the scene, she is singing (as a playback voice?) to a group of men, accompanied by two dancers, but also to female star Zeba (b. 1939 or 1943, "The Elizabeth Taylor of Pakistan") who sits closest to Jehan. (At least the person who posted it says the female is Zeba) It seems the song is in Urdu, and recognizable as a popular genre song. In addition the footage is in black and white. The clip can be seen on YouTube, but there it is attributed to *Aadmi Aur Inssan* (d. Yosh Chopra, 1969) which is a Hindi film in color:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4quoHgn_ww
and
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwWTzofRlo>.

I would appreciate any expert advice on this rather confused matter, and will use it to correct the attribution. In terms of the film I'm discussing, this film-within-the-film represents the pleasure of watching a well done music and dance number, since the viewers-within-the-film do not know Urdu, which then fits with *Public Toilet*'s overall themes of global migration and cosmopolitan culture.

8. A joke in which the Hong Kong director indirectly addresses the late 1990s surge of Korean commercial films, often with expensive effects. Although a bare bones, digital video work, *Public Toilet* was financed with Korean capital and played in festivals as a Korean entry. [[return to page 2](#)]

9. Fruit Chan's undramatic realism here contrasts with the well known Robert Gardner film, *Forest of Bliss* (1986) which presents an extremely romantic and lyrical documentary vision/version of Benaras. Gardner's film has received extensive criticism from anthropologists for being unscientific, Orientalist, and obscurantist. In response, the Harvard professor dismisses any and all criticism by those who can't grasp his genius. For a detailed consideration, see Jyotsna Kapur, "The Art of Ethnographic Film and the Politics of Protesting Modernity: Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss*," *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 9, pp. 167-185.

10. What isn't presented around the toilet theme is also significant. There is no allusion to men's toilets as homosexual meeting places for casual and

anonymous sex. And there is never any mention of a particularly female aspect of sanitary concern: menstruation.

11. With my admittedly limited knowledge, as I understand contemporary Japan, the emotional inexpressiveness of salaried middle class men is often discussed as a social problem, illustrated by the need to get drunk and sing karaoke to let out emotions, etc. That men are not in touch with their inner selves and deny their emotions is part of a rather banal social commentary about masculinity—the kind seen on TV. I believe that Japanese feminists have a much richer, more complex and nuanced analysis of this, but their views seem to be effectively silenced by the media, the Japanese academy, etc. [[return to page 3](#)]

12. The inevitable interviews with Miike about this affirms that the performer, Shugiku Uchida, a famous manga artist, had recently given birth and was actively producing milk.

13. Vivian Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary,” in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004)

Bill Nichols, “Axiographics: Ethical Space in Documentary Film,” in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 76-103.

14. José B. Capino, personal correspondence, June 2010.

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